

Mariano Sabino Otero

1844–1904

TERRITORIAL DELEGATE 1879–1881
REPUBLICAN FROM NEW MEXICO

A successful rancher and banker, Mariano Otero enjoyed a short-lived career in elective office that was emblematic of the web of business and familial connections among the territorial political elite. His uncle, Miguel Antonio Otero, Sr., served as New Mexico's Delegate to the U.S. House from 1856 to 1861. His cousin, Miguel Antonio Otero, Jr., built a career as a powerful state politician, eventually becoming the only Hispanic-American governor of the New Mexico Territory. In accepting the nomination in 1878 to run as the Republican nominee for Territorial Delegate, Otero wrote, "The confidence manifested by the unanimity of my nomination arouses in me the most profound emotions of gratitude and an earnest determination to spare no effort and hesitate at no sacrifice of my personal convenience to discharge worthily the duties of the position."¹ His fleeting career at the federal level coincided with the declining influence of the Republican Party in late 19th-century New Mexico.

Mariano Sabino Otero was born in Peralta, Valencia County, New Mexico, on August 28, 1844, to Juan Otero and his wife, whose name is not known. He was educated in private and parochial schools in New Mexico and then studied at St. Louis University. Upon returning to New Mexico, Otero became a sheep and cattle rancher and later moved into banking. The Otero family dominated Valencia County, which at one time stretched from Texas to California. The eastern part of the county was bordered by the San José, Rio Puerco, and Rio Grande Rivers; the west was bordered by streams that flowed into the Zuñi River. The sprawling county was separated by the Continental Divide, with the Zuñi Mountains in its northwest quadrant.² Mariano Otero relocated to Albuquerque and married Filomena Perea, the sister of Pedro Perea, a rising politico who eventually served as a Delegate in Congress.

The couple had five children: Margarita; Frederick; Alfredo; Mariano, Jr.; and Dolores.³

Otero became active in politics when he served as probate judge in Bernalillo County from 1871 to 1879. In 1874 state Democrats nominated him for congressional Delegate, but he declined their offer, perhaps because of the responsibilities of managing his business empire; he not only achieved great success in ranching, marketing, and commerce, but he also owned the Nuestra Señora de la Luz de los Lagunitas Land Grant, which comprised more than 39,000 acres.⁴

In 1878 the state Republican Party nominated Otero to run for the Delegate's seat. This time Otero reluctantly accepted the nomination. Santa Fe's *New Mexican*, a mouthpiece for the GOP, noted Otero's "superior qualifications for the position are well known to the entire community and ... [he] is universally recognized and respected as a gentleman of fine ability." The newspaper noted that Otero "did not seek the nomination; in fact [he] earnestly entreated the delegates to nominate another man; but so strong was the feeling in his favor that no heed was given to his declination ... and [he] was nominated by acclamation."⁵ In his acceptance letter, Otero thanked the committee. As "the candidate of the Republican party," he expressed pride in "its record and achievements and loyal[ty] to its principles." If elected, Otero promised to "earnestly endeavor to fairly represent all the people and the interests of every section of the Territory, faithfully, honestly, and to the very best of my ability." Otero also indicated his desire and expectation that his political opponents would place the welfare of the territory above expedient political maneuvering, and asked for "the sympathy and assistance not only of my political friends and supporters but of all my fellow citizens whose intelligence and patriotism impels them to regard as



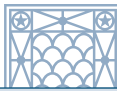
paramount to all other considerations the welfare and the prosperity and happiness of [the New Mexican] people.”⁶ As was often the case in New Mexican politics of this era, the opposing political candidate was a relative. Democrat Benito Baca was a successful entrepreneur who came from a prominent political family in San Miguel County, in the north-central portion of the territory, and was married to a niece of Otero’s uncle, Miguel Antonio Otero, Sr. Baca’s campaign was hamstrung by health issues. Suffering from carbuncle, a bacterial skin infection that causes large boils, Baca underwent a painful surgery but recovered to run in the election.⁷

Otero traversed the territory, visiting Valencia, Socorro, and San Miguel Counties, some of the most populated portions of New Mexico. The editors of the *Santa Fe New Mexican* predicted, “Old reliable Republican counties will give larger republican majorities than ever before.” They also reported dissatisfaction within Democratic sectors: “Not only are republicans aroused by the disreputable course of the democrats ... but many respectable democrats [who] are disgusted with the course of that party, and not willing to bear any share in the responsibilities for the vile slanders ... have repudiated the party and its candidate, and are working for Otero.”⁸ Otero was so popular that one political observer wrote a “Homily in Verse” lauding his nomination and urging readers to vote for him: “So then New Mexicans, love your country, vote for Mariano Otero, drop Benito Baca; taking a closer look and reflecting on the issue New Mexico declares, Elect our champion!”⁹ Esteem for the two candidates energized the bases of their parties, resulting in a large turnout. The popular vote was split nearly down the middle. Otero prevailed on Election Day with 9,739 votes to Benito Baca’s 9,067, translating into a narrow 52 to 48 percent margin of victory. The editors of the *New Mexican* considered the 1878 election “among the most fairly and most closely contested elections that have transpired since the organization of the territory” and attributed the closeness of the election to the Republicans’ disorganization early in the race and the Democrats’ efficiency rallying supporters.¹⁰

Elected to the 46th Congress (1879–1881), Otero was sworn in on March 19, 1879.¹¹ Under new House Rules enacted during his tenure, he became the first New Mexican Territorial Delegate—and only the second Hispanic-American Member of Congress—to earn a committee assignment, on the Committee on Coinage, Weights, and Measures. Otero tended primarily to constituent services by submitting pension and relief requests for individuals in the territory as well as bills supporting the education of Pueblo Indian children. Also, like many of his predecessors, he sought to secure federal appropriations for local projects.¹²

When it came time for the 1880 elections, Otero declined to seek renomination after serving a single term. He returned to New Mexico, where he pursued his business interests and a career in state politics. By 1884 Otero had affiliated himself with powerful Republican oligarchs like Stephen Elkins and Thomas Catron, along with his relatives José Francisco Chaves and Miguel Otero in the Santa Fe Ring.¹³ From 1884 to 1886, he served as commissioner of Bernalillo County. He also served as a delegate to the 1889 territorial constitutional convention.¹⁴

By the late 1880s, Otero’s connections to the Santa Fe Ring had renewed his interest in the coveted Delegate post. In 1888 and 1890 he ran as a Republican, but he lost both times by narrow margins to Antonio Joseph because of the GOP’s factionalism and Joseph’s wide popularity.¹⁵ During the 1888 campaign, Otero was well received throughout the territory. A newspaper account reported, “Expressions of gratitude are being received from all over the county [Dona Ana] about the nomination of Mariano S. Otero ... [who] is so well known in this county that there is no need to praise him in our area.”¹⁶ A man who identified himself as “a Mexican” appealed to *Hispano* constituents in a campaign poem: “O valiant Mexican!/If you want to be protected.../Cast your vote and your support/For Otero, our champion.” The poem then exhorted voters, “Be free! Be proud!/Noble blood runs in your veins/Have Courage! The world is yours!/Take the chains off your neck.”¹⁷ But Joseph prevailed, with 53.5 percent of the vote to Otero’s 46.5 percent.



In the 1890 race, Joseph suffered the political fallout from his failure the previous year to support the proposed draft of the New Mexico state constitution. The Republican organ, the Santa Fe *Daily New Mexican*, portrayed Otero as a progressive, business-oriented candidate who would resolve land grant issues and move New Mexico forward.¹⁸ In fact, a major plank of Otero's platform was to resolve some of the outstanding land titles that plagued New Mexico.¹⁹ In other sections of the territory, Otero was "pushing the battle to the wall, and ... being ably seconded by local leaders and county committees."²⁰ One editor wrote, Otero "represents the party which has declared itself in favor of those measures of public policy which are best calculated to promote the material interests of New Mexico, and ... puts those principles into practice."²¹ Nevertheless, the Democratic incumbent won by a 53 to 47 percent margin that was nearly identical to the one he had polled two years earlier.²²

Otero's second unsuccessful campaign effectively ended his quest to rejuvenate his career in elective politics. During the 1890s, he served as president of the Albuquerque Bank of Commerce. On February 1, 1904, Otero died of a stroke at age 59.²³

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Mariano Sabino Otero," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

RESEARCH COLLECTIONS

New Mexico State Records Center and Archives (Santa Fe). Otero is included among the correspondents in the Governor L. Bradford Prince papers, 1889–1893.

University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research (Albuquerque). Otero is included among the correspondents in the Charles Lanman correspondence, 1860–1868.

NOTES

1 "Mr. Otero's Letter of Acceptance," 17 August 1878, (Santa Fe) *The New Mexican*: 2.

- 2 Charles Coan, *A History of New Mexico*, vol. 1 (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1925): 551–552.
- 3 "Mariano Otero," in Maurilio E. Vigil, *Los Patronos: Profiles of Hispanic Political Leaders in New Mexico History* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980): 74–76; "Hon. M. S. Otero: His Sudden Death from Apoplexy Early This Morning at His Residence," 1 February 1904, *Albuquerque Daily Citizen*: 1; "Warring Republican Factions," 10 October 1890, *New York Times*: 2; *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Population Schedule, Bernalillo, Bernalillo, New Mexico Territory*, Roll T9_802, page 29.3000, <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed 5 June 2010).
- 4 Carlos Brazil Ramirez, "The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico: A Study of Classical Colonialism," (Ph.D. diss., University of California–Santa Barbara, 1979): 298–299.
- 5 "Our Candidate," 3 August 1878, (Santa Fe) *The New Mexican*: 2.
- 6 "Mr. Otero's Letter of Acceptance."
- 7 "Death of Don Benito Baca," 25 June 1879, (Las Cruces, NM) *Thirty-Four*: 1; "Honor to the Dead: The Territorial Press on the Death of Don Benito Baca," 2 July 1879, (Las Cruces, NM) *Thirty-Four*. Baca was born on March 10, 1849, to Juan Maria Baca and Dolores Sandoval de Baca. Juan Maria Baca was a prominent political leader and probate judge in San Miguel County and one of the founders of its county seat, Las Vegas. Benito studied at a private school in Santa Fe and graduated from St. Louis University. He worked for Otero, Sellar, and Company for three years and managed a large family estate in Las Vegas. Baca married Emilia Otero, a niece of former Territorial Delegate Miguel Antonio Otero, Sr., in 1873. After the election, Baca underwent a second surgical procedure but died on June 21, 1879. For more information about Baca, see Benjamin M. Read, *Illustrated History of New Mexico* (New York: Arno Press, 1976; reprint of 1912 edition): 732–733; and Ramirez, "The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico: A Study of Classical Colonialism": 298–299.
- 8 "The Campaign," 21 September 1878, (Santa Fe) *The New Mexican*: 2.
- 9 "Pues bien, Nuevo Mejicanos/Teneis amor por la Patria/Votad por Mariano Otero/Dejad á Benito Baca/Dando una mirada electa/ Reflejando la cuestion/El Nuevo Méjico grita/Electo nuestro campeón," Un Viajero (A Traveler), "Homilía en Verso," 2 November 1878, *The New Mexican* (Santa Fe, NM): 2. Translated as "Homily in Verse," by Translations International, Inc. (December 2009).
- 10 "The Official Count on Delegate," 7 December 1878, (Santa Fe) *The New Mexican*: 2; "Lessons of the Campaign," 16 November 1878, (Santa Fe) *The New Mexican*: 2.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 46th Cong., 1st sess. (19 March 1879): 19.
- 12 See listings in the *Congressional Record Index*, 46th Cong., 2nd sess.: 644.

- 13 Robert W. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846–1912* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968): 144.
- 14 For more information about the 1889 territorial constitutional convention, see Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846–1912*: 147–168.
- 15 “Overtaken by the Pale Rider,” 1 February 1904, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 1; Ramirez, “The Hispanic Political Elite in Territorial New Mexico: A Study of Classical Colonialism”: 299; Coan, *A History of New Mexico*, vol. 1: 409.
- 16 “De todos [*sic*] partes de el [*sic*] condado vienen espreciones [*sic*] de gratificación sobre la nominación de Don Mariano S. Otero ... es tan bien conocido en este condado que no hay necesidad de elogiarlo en nuestra parte,” “Egos Políticos,” 11 September 1888, *El observador fronterizo* (Las Cruces, NM): 1. Translated as “Political Egos” by Translations International, Inc. (December 2009).
- 17 Coan, *A History of New Mexico*, vol. 1: 490; “Mejicano valiente! Si deseas protección ... Da tu voto y soporte/A Otero nuestro campeón ... Sois libre! Tienes orgullo!/Sangre noble corre en tus venas/Ten valor! El Mundo es tuyo!/Quitate del pezcueso [*sic*] las cadenas,” “Viva Otero,” 30 October 1888, *El observador fronterizo* (Las Cruces, NM): 1. Translated as “Long Live Otero” by Translations International, Inc. (December 2009).
- 18 “Another Lie Exploded,” 23 October 1890, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 2; “Warring Republican Factions,” 10 October 1890, *New York Times*: 2. According to this article in the *New York Times*, Otero’s support splintered when he became involved in a feud with his Perea relatives over the choice of Bernalillo County sheriff. Otero voted for Perfecto Armijo, while the Perea clan supported a relative, José L. Perea, for the position. By mid-October, wrote the *New York Times*, Otero “dropped his Territorial canvass against Anthony Joseph ... and says he will devote his time here to defeating the Pereas.” While the *New Mexican* alleged that the *New York Times* story was a lie, this incident, whether or not it actually occurred, illustrates the intense political competition between the Oteros and the Pereas.
- 19 “Mr. Joseph’s Course on the Land Court Bill,” 15 October 1890, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 2.
- 20 “Cheering News for M. S. Otero,” 23 October 1890, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 2.
- 21 “The Only Question,” 1 November 1890, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 2. See also “A Business Reason Why M. S. Otero Should Be Elected,” 30 October 1890, (Santa Fe) *Daily New Mexican*: 2.
- 22 “Statement of the Vote of the Territory of New Mexico for Delegate to the Fifty-Second Congress, Cast at the November Election 1890, as Declared by the Secretary of the Territory, December 6, 1890,” Copy of the Executive Proceedings of the Territory of New Mexico, July 1, 1889–December 31, 1899, National Archives Microfilm Publication M364, Roll 2, Interior Department Territorial Papers, New Mexico, 1851–1914, Records of the Department of the Interior, Record Group 48; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. The election results are also listed in Coan, *A History of New Mexico*, vol. 1: 409.
- 23 “Mariano Otero,” in Vigil, *Los Patrones*: 74; “Hon. M. S. Otero: His Sudden Death from Apoplexy Early This Morning at His Residence.”



“I HOLD THAT NO CITIZEN HAS
THE RIGHT TO REFUSE TO SERVE
HIS COUNTRY IN ANY PUBLIC
POSITION TO WHICH HIS FELLOW
CITIZENS MAY CALL HIM.”

Mariano Otero
(Santa Fe) *The New Mexican*, August 17, 1878